

Evangelical Bible College of Malawi



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Passionately Transforming & Equipping

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Introduction

The history of Christianity in Africa has usually been written within the context of missionary encounter with indigenous culture and the subsequent influence of European cultural ideas. The establishment of African Independent churches marks a significant movement in the religious landscape of Africa reflecting a profound desire for spiritual, cultural and political autonomy. It was emerging primarily in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Kofi Appian- kubi defined African independent churches as '... churches founded by Africans in our special African situation. They all African membership as well as all African leadership. They were founded in reaction to some of missionary societies...'. This implies that AICs were formed and led by Africans, these leaders played a pivotal role in breaking the dominant missionary led Christians denominations, which were often work together with colonial rule. Their rise is attributed to a complex interplay of factors, including the quest for cultural identity, resistance to colonial oppression, and the need for religious practices that resonate with indigenous traditions and values for Africans. This essay aims to assess the reasons behind the formation of AICs, it explores the sociopolitical, cultural, and theological motivations that fueled this transformative movement within African Christianity.

Historical background

After the discovery of Africa by explorers like Prince Henry, Father Goncalo Da Silver, Vasco Da Gama and many more, it became known in Europe,

and upon the arrival of Missionaries in Africa, they were met with diverse forms of government, and at that time, the demand for slaves was very high. Mostly, they were welcomed by chiefs and people who wanted to get what missionaries brought to them. Some who were doing slave trade opposed their settlement and sometimes forced them to leave. Many who were interested in trade began to arrive; people from Dutchland, France, Portugal, and many others started to take possession of huge areas of Africa, as a result, conflict rose among these European countries, a conference was held in Berlin in 1884-1885. The primary purpose of this conference was to divide Africa into areas of influence which began to be ruled by Europeans. It also encourages “colonialism” and European nationalism, which influence the ministries of the missionary societies. As a result, many missionaries were seen as supporting the colonial governments.

Many African people were taught in mission schools that gave them entrance into a new way of thinking and bond in their Christian faith which brought them together,

Very soon they began to think about their place in the world

Colonialism and the Missionary Enterprise

Colonialism and missionaries played a significant role in the formation of African Independent church, the colonial context within which missionary activities occurred. European colonial powers and missionaries often worked hand in hand, with missionaries sometimes acting as agents of colonial interests. Colonialism imposed a system of governance that marginalized African societies, often aligning with missionary activities to consolidate control, as such missionary churches were seen as extensions of colonial power that promoted European dominance and suppressed local traditions and values. This association fostered resentment among Africans, who saw Christianity as a tool of colonial domination,

the hierarchical structure and discrimination within colonial and missionary churches often marginalized African worshippers , leading to feelings of exclusion and alienation, as the result, many Africans sought to establish their own churches where they could practice their faith freely without facing discrimination. The imposition of European cultural norms, languages, and practices through the church alienated many Africans, leading to the desire for religious expressions that resonated more closely with their cultural identities. As Hastings (1994) argued, "the church's close ties with the colonial administration made it a target for \nationalist sentiments".

Social and Political Resistance

The formation of African independent churches was largely fueled by social and political factors. During the colonial period, Africans were subjected to oppressive and exploitative policies by European colonizers and missionaries respectively, there were forced conversion to Christianity, African clergy and congregants faced systemic racism, including limited leadership opportunities. This discrimination led to a desire for churches where Africans could exercise full control and they started to reject the Western form of Christianity and a desire for a religion that was more relevant to their cultural and social context. At the same time, political repression and discrimination against Africans in colonial society sparked a search for alternative sources of power, identity, and community. This combination of social and political factors created space for the emergence of African Independent Churches, which provided a sense of agency and empowerment to Africans. Many African leaders saw independent churches as a way to mobilize and unify their people, promoting a sense of nationalism and resistance against colonial rule. They also provided a platform for Africans to express their grievances and advocate for social justice. These churches often incorporated indigenous beliefs and practices and promoted social and economic advancement within their communities. They also served as platforms for political resistance against colonial rule, as such AICs were formed to reclaim their cultural heritage, challenge oppressive systems and create their own space for religious expression and social change.

Economic Factors

Anderson (2001) states that economic factors played a pivotal role in the establishment of African Independent Churches. As Colonial rulers had their economic policies that infringe African communities, this led to economic hardships, as the indigenous people were forced to work for low wages and their land and resources were taken away. As a result, many Africans turned to Christianity as a source of hope and comfort. However, due to the racial discrimination and segregation within the Missionary churches, and failed to address these economic grievances of their African congregants, many Africans felt marginalized and excluded. This prompted them to seek alternative forms of worship that aligned with their cultural beliefs and practices. Additionally, the high fees required for membership in the mainstream churches further alienated the poor African population. As a response, African Independent churches emerged, providing an affordable and inclusive place of worship for the marginalized communities. These churches also promoted economic self-sufficiency by encouraging entrepreneurship and supporting community development initiatives. Thus, economic factors such as poverty, exploitation, and exclusion played a pivotal role in inspiring the establishment of African Independent churches as a means of addressing both spiritual and economic needs of the African people.

Cultural and Religious Syncretism

African traditional religious beliefs and practices played a significant role in the formation of AICs. The syncretic blending of Christianity with indigenous African religions allowed for a more culturally relevant expression of faith. Elements such as ancestral veneration, traditional healing practices, and local customs were incorporated into the worship and organizational structure of AICs. This syncretism provided a spiritual home for Africans who felt disconnected from the rigid doctrines and liturgies of European churches.

The theological discontent

Many African missionary churches' teachings and practices was another critical factor. Missionary activities sought to replace African cultural practices and beliefs with European norms, leading to cultural alienation. Missionaries condemned traditional African religious practices, calling them pagan or heathen due to their non-Christian beliefs. These cultural and theological suppression motivated Africans to break free from the dominance western missionaries and their theological traditions, they rejected the imposition of western cultural and theological norms, seeking to Many Africans were dissatisfied with the teachings and practices of the missionary churches that were established by European colonizers. They felt that these churches did not adequately address their needs and did not reflect their cultural values. As the result many Africans sought to establish their own churches that were more in line with their beliefs and practices,

they often incorporated elements of traditional African spirituality and worship practices, as well as a focus on social justice and empowerment for the marginalized communities.

Theological discontent also fueled the establishment of AICs by challenging the authority and dominance of the missionary churches, as many Africans rejected the idea that Christianity had to spread through Western missionary efforts and instead sought to create their own indigenous expression of faith.

Charismatic Leadership and Prophetic Movements

Many AICs were founded by charismatic leaders who claimed divine visions or revelations. These leaders offered new theological perspectives and practices distinct from missionary churches, attracting followers who felt underserved by existing denominations (Anderson: 2001). Charismatic leaders are individuals who possess exceptional personal qualities, which inspire loyalty and enthusiasm among followers. They often exhibit strong communication skills, visionary thinking and a sense of purpose, some examples of such leaders were Simon Kimbangu from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who founded the Kimbanguist Church, he had healing powers and spiritual visions attracted a significant following. Him with other leaders served as central authority figures, guiding the organization and growth of the church, their person magnetism drew followers and legitimized the new religious movements. They provided a clear vision and

mission that resonated with the cultural and spiritual needs of the local population.

Prophetic movements, these are religious movements centered on individuals regarded as prophets, who claim to have received divine revelations or messages, these movements emphasize direct communication with the divine, and these movements arose as forms of resistance against colonial rule and missionary dominance. They offered an alternative spiritual and social framework that emphasized liberation, autonomy and African Identity. The combination of Charismatic leadership and prophetic movements facilitated the rapid growth and spread of AICs, because these leaders claimed to have special spiritual gifts, such as healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues. As such they offered a form of Christianity that have sense of empowerment and liberation to their followers, offering a form of religious expression that resonated with their cultural and spiritual identities, perceived as more authentic and relevant to African experiences and world views. These helped in fostering a sense of community and identity among followers, these leaders sometimes also addressed socio-political issues, providing a voice to the marginalized and oppressed, as such local people joined these churches as they were able to innovate and adapt Christian practices to fit African cultural contexts, which included incorporating African music, dance and rituals into worship.

Conclusion

The establishment of African Independent Churches was significantly influenced by the interplay between colonialism and missionary enterprises. Political, social, cultural, and economic pressures exerted by colonial rule, combined with the rigid and often discriminatory practices of missionary churches, created fertile ground for the emergence of AICs. These churches provided a space for Africans to reclaim their religious and cultural autonomy, reinterpret Christian teachings in ways that resonated with their lived experiences, and assert their agency in the face of colonial oppression.

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